

A Townley-funded project to a remote corner of the Himalayas is documenting the area's culture for the first time and throwing new light on the Museum's collections

On the borders of Tibet



The Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, the

region in the eastern Himalayas where Bhutan, Tibet and Burma meet India, is the focus of a new five-year Indo-British research project in which the British Museum is participating. The exploratory 2002 season and the more substantial expedition in January and February of this year, supported by the Townley Group, have enabled me to return to Bloomsbury with collections which not only throw light upon existing holdings in the Museum, but also document the fast-changing culture of this mountain



Left: Following new research and photography, the massive stupa at Gorsam, the centre of a major cult, is to be published for the first time

Below: The famous lama-dance of the Torgya festival

The town of Tawang itself is renowned as the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama, and is the main centre of Tibetan Buddhism in the state. Visiting the Namgyal Monastery in Tawang in early

in their original environment was enormously useful for our understanding of their functions and for their better display in the Museum.

The support of the Townley Group enabled me to acquire contemporary material from Tawang District which illustrates the continuity of traditional aspects of life, especially in the practice of Buddhism. The making of small clay votive objects, pressed from metal moulds, is a Buddhist practice which can be documented in the Museum's collection from the middle of the 1st millennium AD onwards, although almost always without any contextual information as to production and use. The objects now acquired enter the Museum with precisely this information and can be used, with caution, to comment on the many examples we already have. Other items collected in a similar vein include a variety of block-printed objects – prayers on cloth and hand-made paper which are suspended from tall poles ('prayer-flags'); amulets which are hung around the neck; mantras which are contained within prayer wheels turned by the pious

when they circumambulate sacred sites – in one case an entire wooden prayer wheel was entrusted to me for the Museum's collection.

Meanwhile, research work has included documenting, for the first time, the shrines around Tawang that are, in legend, associated with Padmasambhava, the 8th-century apostle of Buddhism to the Tibetan world. These have never been more than listed and completely lack photographic or written descriptions, let alone any understanding of the cultic activities which take place there and which attract pilgrims from all over this part of the eastern Himalayas. Further, the massive stupa at Gorsam, the centre of a major cult, was measured and photographed so that detailed information on it can now be published for the first time.

Plans for next year include the recording and preserving of precious photographic and documentary evidence of the history of this little-studied area; it is hoped that the Townley Group will enable us to do this, as well as to continue with the important task of collecting for the future of the Museum.

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Further details on the project can be found on www.tribaltransitions.soas.ac.uk

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zone. The remoteness of the area during the colonial period, and its political instability in the post-independence era (China invaded the region in 1962), have meant that little basic documentation work has been carried out.

The project, Tribal Transitions, is directed by Dr Stuart Blackburn of the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London, and is made up of three members in the UK and three in India. Over the next five years the main animist and Buddhist groups will be studied, with the emphasis on religion, material culture and oral tradition. My focus this past season, however, was the district of Tawang in the far north-west of the state where it abuts Bhutan and Tibet.

February meant that the project photographer Michael Tarr and I could witness the famous lama-dances of the Torgya Festival towards the end of the Tibetan year. These take place continuously for three days and are a means of ensuring prosperity and good fortune in the coming year. Masked dancing by the young, barefoot lamas is carried out irrespective of the weather; this year it snowed for two of the three days. Recording this festival photographically as well as in writing was one of the aims of the past season. Items of costume, as well as ritual objects and musical instruments witnessed in this religious rite, exist in the historic collections of the British Museum and the opportunity to see them in use